



Rep. John Dingell points to a TV screen as he follows Senate action on some of the amendments to the health care reform bill named for him and also is interviewed by The Washington Times on June 18. (Astrid Riecken/The Washington Times)

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Dingell, in father's steps, backs health care to end

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Over the past 27 sessions of Congress, there has been a Dingell universal health care bill pending, a proposal first introduced in the middle of World War II.

The bill, to create a single-payer universal-coverage health system, stood little chance of passage over the decades, making its biennial introduction more of a tribute by Rep. John D. Dingell to his father, who introduced similar legislation when he was in Congress, representing the same Michigan district his son now represents.

This year, however, the longest-serving member in the history of the House of Representatives says the introduction of his health care bill is going to be more than symbolic.

At President Obama's urging, the House has begun hearings on its massive health care reform bill, a proposal that would change the course of American health care. Democratic colleagues have officially named the bill after Mr. Dingell to honor his work.

"When Dad introduced the bill, it was a matter of humanitarian concern," the Michigan Democrat told *The Washington Times* in an interview. "Today, it's still a humanitarian concern, but American industry is going broke because they can't afford" health coverage.

Mr. Dingell credits his interest in health care to his father, John D. Dingell Sr., who represented Michigan's 15th district for 22 years until his death in 1955.

The senior Mr. Dingell survived tuberculosis — a rarity in the early 20th century — despite not having health coverage, and made it his life's work to expand health coverage to all Americans. He first introduced a bill to establish a single-payer health care program, with universal coverage, in 1943.

When he died in 1955, his 29-year-old son took over his seat, fixed up his father's bill and introduced it himself in 1957. He has continued to introduce the bill in every Congress since.

The sense of history was not lost on Rep. Charles B. Rangel, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, when the draft bill was introduced earlier this month.

"To be working in the shadows of John Dingell's dad and recognizing the historic work that he's done over the years in the health reform system just reminds me of how many politicians, members of Congress and presidents have said that they're going to do something about reforming our health system," said Mr. Rangel, New York Democrat.

Still, the bill the House is working on now isn't exactly what the Dingells have proposed, which typically carries the bill number of the Dingell district — 15 or 16. Both offer universal coverage, but the older bill would have created a single-payer health care system, which today is a politically volatile proposition most observers think Congress is not ready to accept.

But even the modified bill "is going to make progress," Mr. Dingell insisted. "It's going to solve the problems that we confront."

The draft bill includes sweeping changes to the American health care system, including the creation of a public health insurance option to compete with private insurers. It also would require employers to provide coverage and individuals to obtain it. The proposal, the details of which are still being hammered out in committee hearings, does not include critical details on how it would be financed.

The proposal faces opposition from Republicans and the insurance industry.

Mr. Dingell, who built a legendary power base on the Hill while wielding the gavel at the House Energy and Commerce Committee, has witnessed a number of attempts to reform health care, notably the 1993 work by former President Bill Clinton and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. That year, the bill failed by one vote in Mr. Dingell's committee.

This year is different, he said, citing strong support from congressional Democrats and Mr. Obama, grass-roots support and even the economic downturn, which he said is highlighting the financial impact and inefficiencies of the current U.S. health care system.

"Sufficient with a good majority in the Congress, I think it all comes together as being a time when we can and, very truthfully, when we should," he said.

He expects skeptical Democrats eventually to climb on board when they have time to absorb the details of the proposal, but he isn't as eager as other top Democrats to predict full support.

"The bill has a lot of enemies, and getting major legislation of this kind passed is extremely difficult, particularly in the Senate," Mr. Dingell said.

Mr. Dingell has presided over some of the most substantial changes in American health care, including the creation of Medicare in 1965 and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in 1997.

"Every single health care bill has gone through [the Energy and Commerce Committee]," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, a health care consumer advocacy group. "And through his role as chairman, and a leader in the Democratic caucus on health care, his imprint is on every piece of legislation."

"The Dingell family has carried the torch for health care reform for many, many decades," he said.

Mr. Dingell has used his role as chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee — a position he lost to Rep. Henry A. Waxman, California Democrat, last year — to investigate various aspects of the industry, particularly insurers.

"I found the insurance industry, particularly the health insurance industry, to have done some scandalous things," he said, recounting stories of pressure on customers to buy policies they did not need, restrictions on customers with pre-existing conditions and "cherry-picking" by insurers to accept only healthy and cheap customers. The bill includes provisions that would provide a check to the insurers, he said.

Though he is no longer chairman, Mr. Dingell said he has two staffers dedicated full time to health care and he's happy with the direction in which the bill is going.

The draft was introduced by the chairmen of the three committees with jurisdiction — Energy and Commerce, Education and Labor, and Ways and Means — as well as by the subcommittee chairmen and Mr. Dingell.

The idea to name the bill after Mr. Dingell came from Mr. Waxman and Mr. Rangel, according to Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller, California Democrat.

"I thought it was a great idea," he said, "as a legacy to his father and his own involvement."